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# A Post-Shoah Rewriting of Job as seen in Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*

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Bachelor of Arts

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

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A Post-Shoah Rewriting of Job as seen in Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*

By: J. Ellie Smith

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How does one react when faced with unspeakable horrors and when calls to God yield silence or worse? One can lose faith, hold steadfast in belief, or question God.

Survivors of the Holocaust have expressed these questions, in particular Elie Wiesel. Two responses to these questions also came from Job in the Old Testament story. Both Wiesel and Job suffer unjustly under the eye of their God, thus putting God on trial. However, Wiesel takes on a post-Shoah reinterpretation of Job because unlike Job, not only does he question God; Wiesel further refuses to accept answers. All Wiesel does is question. He will not let God get away with the events of the Holocaust. This idea is expressed in Wiesel's writings such as "Job, Our Contemporary," and *The Trial of God*. In his writings Wiesel's characters take on the persona of Job and go one step further because they will not accept any answers; for answers are final solutions, and there should be no more final solutions after the events of the Holocaust. This thesis argues that Wiesel creates a modern day reinterpretation of the Book Job in his play *The Trial of God* that fits into a post- Shoah theodicy.

**The Book of Job**

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The story of Job was familiar to Elie Wiesel; growing up he studied the Torah and the Talmud extensively.[1] In "Job, Our Contemporary" and *The Trial of God*, Wiesel makes connections and references to the story of Job. The biblical book of Job has influenced his world view and theodicy. A theodicy is an explanation for evil and suffering in the world. The standard question of theodicy is that if God is both omnibenevolent and omnipotent, why is there evil and suffering in the world? Either God

[1] Ted L. Estess, *Elie Wiesel* (New York, NY, Frederick Ungar, 1980), ix.

is not all good and does not care or God is not all powerful and cannot stop it.[2] The book of Job presents a theodicy unique to the Bible.

It is unclear when exactly Job was written; however, the common belief is that it was completed after the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE, the first *Churban*. *Churban* is the Yiddish word for destruction. There have been three of these, the destruction of the first temple in 586, the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, and the destruction of the Jewish people from 1939-1945. Job was a product of the first *Churban* and Elie Wiesel's writings and theodicy are responses to the final one. Some people prefer to use the term *Churban* rather than Shoah or Holocaust to describe the destruction of the Jewish people from 1939-1945.

The story of Job has an interesting background. It was originally a short story, which was split into two and had poetry placed in the middle of it.[3] It is classified as wisdom literature and it is also a theodicy. Job presents a picture of a universal God because Job is not an Israelite; however, he is deeply religious. The text of Job is placed into the biblical tradition of questioning God which begins in Genesis 18, in which Abraham argues with God for the sake of others.

The story of Job is this: Job is a devout man who believes in God and does everything that a religiously proper person should do.[4] One day God is declaring to his heavenly court about how wonderful Job is, and *ha-satan*, a member of God's court, says:

> Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that

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[2] Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question- Why We Suffer* (New York, NY, HarperOne, 2008), 8.
[3] James L. Crenshaw, *Reading Job: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011), 10-11.
[4] In general on my reading of Job I am relying upon C. Fred Alford, *After the Holocaust: The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction* (New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2009); Crenshaw, Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2003).

> his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has and he will surely curse you to your face. (NRSV: Job 1:9-11)

Then God creates a contest with *ha-satan*. God believes that no matter what he does to Job, Job will remain faithful; and *ha-satan* thinks that Job will eventually break down.

At first God says that *ha-satan* can do anything but "lay a finger" on Job (Job 1:18). *Ha-satan* goes to earth and caused "a mighty wind [to sweep] in from the desert and [it] struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them [all of Job's children] and they all are dead (Job 1:19). Just as God predicted Job, has a faithful response: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may then name of the Lord be praised. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoings (Job 1:20-22). God then gives *ha-satan* permission to cause bodily harm to Job, but he cannot kill him: "So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (Job 2:7). At this point Job's wife encourages him to give up on God; however, Job says, "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?" (Job 2:10). Job's suffering gets worse and worse, yet he still does not curse God.

His three friends- Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar- come to visit. At first they sit with him in silence, which is where the prose section ends and the poetry begins. Then Job curses the day he was born and wishes he had never existed so he would not have to suffer (Job 3: 1-26). Job's friends then ask him what he did wrong, because God would not be punishing him if he had not sinned. Eliphaz say, "think now, who that was innocent ever perished" (Job 4:7). To which Job responds that he has done nothing to deserve this suffering. Job says, "for I have not denied the words of the Holy One" (Job 6:10). Later in the text Bildad states, "if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore to you your rightful place" (Job 8:6). After

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Bildad speaks Job once again tries to summon God to talk to him. Job says, "if it is a matter of justice, who can summon him? Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me" (Job 9:19-20). Zophar is no more supportive than the other two; he also believes that Job needs to be punished for his sins. Zophar states, "know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (Job 11:6). Job's friends came to try and give Job support however, all they do is cast blame on Job for his own misfortunes.

Job's three friends represent a theodicy that is present in the book of Deuteronomy, "according to the Deuteronomic theology, God keeps the world in moral balance, rewarding the good and punishing the bad."[5] The idea of unjust suffering did not exist in this system of thought. Job's friends frequently try to figure out what he did that caused God to punish him. They keep telling Job just to come clean about his sins and then the torment will stop. Job argues with them continually because he knows he has done nothing wrong. According to C. Fred Alford, author of a study of Job in Primo Levi's work; "by the end of the Book of Job, God Himself will reject this theology", Job realizes that unjust suffering is part of the universe but his friends are unwilling to accept this idea.[6] Wiesel will include this idea into his theodicy in response to the Holocaust.

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After much back and forth discussion between Job and his friends, Job once again questions God and he demands to have a trial with God. He wants to understand why God has caused all of these awful things to happen to him. He is seeking justice in this world. Job says:

> But I desire to speak with the Almighty and to argue my case with God…Only grant me these two things, O God, and then I will not hide from you; withdraw

[5] Alford, 8.
[6] Alford, 8.

> your hand far from me, and stop frightening me with your terrors. Then summon me and I will answer or let me speak and you reply. How many wrongs and sins have I committed? Show me my offense and my sin (Job 13:3, 20-23).

In 38:1 God creates a whirlwind and finally speaks to Job. Job 38:1 also marks the end of Job's debate with his friends. God arrives in a whirlwind with intimidating questions for Job. Instead of answering Job's questions God tells him a convoluted creation story. God's questions seemed designed to reveal "one who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge" (Job 38:2).[7] In the end Job replies to God and says, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Job basically is saying: "yes God you are all powerful, you made my life hell, but that is only because you are all powerful, I am wrong." Job apologizes for being tortured by God, and after this God restores Job's life to what it had been and his friends actually get punished because they told Job not to question God.[8] At this point in the book of Job undermines the idea that God just wants docile compliance from humans. God contradicts godself about justice and sin throughout the Book of Job which makes understanding the book much more difficult.

Job is loquacious throughout the book until chapters 38-42. In the end of the Book of Job silence becomes a defining moment in Job's reaction to God's lecture in the whirlwind. The whirlwind lecture works; in Job 40:3-5 Job asserts "I am of small worth; what can I answer you. I clapped my hand to my mouth. I have spoken once and will not reply." God does not respect Job's silent but pursues him with more questions for the next two chapters. After this relentless questioning:

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> Job said in reply to the lord: I know that You can do everything, that nothing you propose is impossible for you. Who is this who obscures counsel without knowledge? Indeed, I

[7] On the divine speeches in Job see Crenshaw, 147-152; Newsom, 234-258.
[8] Crenshaw, 17-20.

> spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know. Hear now, and I will speak; I will ask, and you will inform me. I had heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes; therefore I recant and relent being but dust and ashes (Job 42: 1-6).

It would seem that Job has finally given up, having taken into his own voice God's earlier accusations. Yet 42:7 opens "after the lord has spoken these words to Job." Among an array of grammar and vocabulary problems it becomes increasingly unclear who has expressed defeat in 42.[9]

The God of Job is not exactly a merciful God. He puts Job through torment just because Job was faithful, not because he sinned or did anything wrong but because he believed in God with all his heart. The question of God's justice is ever present throughout the story of Job. Is what God is doing moral? Another key idea that is seen in Job is the idea of questioning God, which will become very important to Elie Wiesel after the Holocaust.

**Theodicy**

The term "theodicy" was created in the 17th century by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "who wrote a lengthy treatise in which he tried to explain how and why there can be suffering in the world if God is all powerful and wants the absolute best for people."[10] The word "is a combination of two Greek words, *theos* and *dike* (God and justice)."[11] Since Leibniz's time many scholars have also tried to come to terms with this issue. Some have asserted that "God is all powerful, God is all loving, there is suffering", but the issue becomes that these all contradict each other in one way or another.[12] Timothy K. Beal asserts that "theodicy concerns divine

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[9] On 42:7 and its many complications see Newsom, 27-31 and Crenshaw, 159-160.
[10] Ehrman, 8.
[11] Crenshaw, 7.
[12] Ehrman, 8.

justice in the face of unjustifiable suffering."[13] The attempts to explain theodicy become increasingly more difficult after the Holocaust.

As a book written in response to great national tragedies, the Bible often comments on suffering and why it occurs. The Pentateuch asserts that if the people of Israel keep God's law than God will in turn protect and guide them.[14] This idea that suffering equates to punishment is throughout the Bible in the stories of the Prophets. The different prophets claim that various sins will lead to "dire consequences."[15] The book of Deuteronomy literally translates to the "second law", which reinforces everything Moses taught the Israelites.[16] The ultimate message of this book is that if people "disobey they will experience horrible and excruciating suffering."[17] Wisdom literature adds new ideas to the preexisting theodicies; these "authors [are] concerned with universal truths" which will lead to a "happy and prosperous life."[18] The book of Proverbs exemplifies the goal of wisdom literature.[19] It asserts that: "right living leads to happiness but wicked behavior leads to suffering," because that is how God made the world.[20] The pattern of sin leading to punishment remains but the sins that cause punishment vary in different books. One of the Bible's first and most common explanations for human suffering is that suffering arises because of human sin.

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The theme of sin and retribution it gets called into question in the book of Job. The book of Job is categorized as a piece of wisdom literature but it perpetuates a different narrative than

[13] Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York, NY, Routledge, 2002), 3.
[14] Ehrman, 29.
[15] Ehrman, 33.
[16] Ehrman, 67.
[17] Ehrman, 67.
[18] Ehrman, 67.
[19] For other works on theodicy, especially in light of Job see: Alford; Richard Rubenstein "Job and Auschwitz" in *Strange Fire*, ed. Tod Linafelt (New York, NY, New York Washington Press, 2000), 233-266.
[20] Ehrman, 62.

that of other biblical wisdom books.[21] Job's friends articulate the traditional theodicy found in the biblical books listed above; they believed that Job sinned, which is why he was being punished. Yet in Job 1:1, it is made explicitly clear to the reader that Job is not a sinner; he is a perfect man. Therefore all of his friends' accusations are wrong. But this still leaves the issue of why Job is suffering. According to Bart Ehrman, the author of *God's Problem*, there are two explanations within the book of Job itself. The book is a combination of "a prose folktale and a set of poetic dialogues."[22] In the prose folktale "God deals with people according to their merit" and "suffering comes as a test of faith."[23] Ehrman goes on to state that the poetry section does just the opposite, "suffering remains a mystery that cannot be fathomed or explained."[24] Even within the text of Job itself there are discrepancies about why people suffer.[25] The book of Job thus creates three theodicies. First, Job's friends believe in a traditional theodicy in which sinners are punished and the righteous are not. Second, Job argues for a theodicy in which suffering is a test of faith, and, when one remains faithful through adversity, one is greatly rewarded. Finally, Job has a theodicy where suffering is a mystery to which God is not required to respond to because he is God.

**Calling Biblical Theodicy into Question**

Biblical theodicy can be called into question for a variety of reasons; one being issues of whether God is omnibenevolent. Even though most Christians believe God is all good based on numerous biblical examples demonstrate that God's character is complex. Beginning with the

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[21] On Job as Wisdom Literature Beal states, "In the book of Job, it is precisely wisdom's guard that breaks down. The story of Job is the story of the exhaustion of wisdom." (36). See also Ehrman, 159-197.
[22] Ehrman, 164.
[23] Ehrman, 164.
[24] Ehrman, 164.
[25] Ehrman's reading is consistent with Crenshaw and Newsom.

book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are not only cast out of Eden but all have curses laid upon them. Adam and all future men will have to suffer with hard labor in order to live in the world; "cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:17). Eve and all future women are cursed with painful childbirth, "to the woman he said, I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). It is clear that God was very upset about being disobeyed, however, just being cast out of Eden would have been sufficient punishment for Adam and Eve's disobedience. God's curses seemed to be unnecessarily harsh for his creations. The traditional theodicy of sin equating to punishment is seen here, but does God's punishment match the sin?[26]

The flood of Noah is also immoral. It seems highly impossible that all of the people on the earth, aside from Noah and his family, were all evil people who deserved to die. God says "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth" (Genesis 6:13). The issue of innocent people are murdered by God is seen here. Also, God kills all of the animals aside from the ones on the ark; "and all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils that was the breath of life died" (Genesis 7:21-22). What did the animals do to deserve being drowned? Nothing, animals are inherently innocent creatures, a God that is omnibenevolent simply would not kill all of his innocent creations in one disaster, meant to kill the evil of the earth. Ehrman asserts, "it's not clear what the animals have done to deserve death, but human beings at least are being punished for their wickedness."[27] God believes what God is

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[26] For another perspective on this idea see David Penchansky, "YHWH the Monster: The *Insecure* God (Genesis 3), in *What Rough Beast: Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 5-20.
[27] Ehrman, 65.

doing is justified; “disobedience needs to be punished and so God killed off nearly the entire human race.”[28] But is mass extermination a solution for any situation? Later God regrets the flood after the catastrophic event, which shows that even God has second thoughts on God’s actions.[29]

In the book of Exodus God’s monstrousness is also exposed. First, God has let his chosen people be enslaved and slaughtered by the Egyptians; “the Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service” (Exodus 1:13-14). If God was all-good and all-powerful, he would not have let this happen in the first place, or he would have done more to stop it. Then once God gets Moses to help, God casts the plagues upon Egypt. The citizens, of Egypt basically had nothing to do with the Pharaoh’s enslavement and slaughter of the Hebrew people, yet all Egyptians suffer under God’s plagues. These plagues are also extremely evil in nature; frogs are one thing, but the rivers turning to blood and then finally the death of all first born sons is just plain evil (Exodus 7:14, 8, 12:29). How could a God who is all-good cause these horrendous plagues that affect any living creature and not just the Pharaoh? How can God punish those who have made no promise to keep his convent and how can he let those who did keep the convent suffer?[30]

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One final example is the book of Job. Not only is Job personally attacked, his family, animals, and servants are also murdered because of God’s instructions (Job 1:13-19). Some will argue that is *ha-satan* that inflicts suffering on Job; however, it is clear that *ha-satan* can only act under God’s instruction. God gives *ha-satan* specific instructions about what he can and cannot

[28] Ehrman, 66.
[29] For more information on God as chaos monster by sending floods see Beal, 13-19 and 89-91.
[30] In *God’s Problem* Ehrman discusses punishment as a consequence for sin and how this theodicy is broken is various places in the Bible including Exodus, 100-103.

do to Job. God says, "'very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD" (Job 1:12). God controls everything that happens to Job. Then God comes down in the whirlwind and question Job into submission and silence (Job 38). How can a God that is all-good inflict this much suffering on a human basically to win a bet? The entire message of the whirlwind is that Job does not matter to God or within the universe. A God that is all-good would care about every one of his creations and would not inflict unnecessary suffering on any one of them. In *Religion and its Monsters*, Beal makes the point that "[Job] cries out to be saved from the abyss and its monsters."[31] In the end of Job 42 it says, "They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought on him" (Job 42:10). In this passage it explicitly states that God caused all of Job's suffering; it exemplifies the claim that God acts monstrously.

In other places in the Old Testament God functions both as monster and fights again the cosmic monsters.[32] In Psalm 74, "God and Leviathan appear in a deadly conflict. There Leviathan is a chaos monster radically threatens the order and well-being of creation as well as its creator God."[33] In Job 41, God refers to both Leviathan and Behemoth: "look at Behemoth which I made just as I made you…Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook" (Job 40: 15 and 41:1). Beal asserts, "but God does not squash Job like a monster. Rather, God *out-monsters* him, pushing the theological crisis brought on by Job's unjustifiable suffering to new, horrifying extremes, opening up a vision of the world and its creator God on the edge."[34] Job itself is pointing the reader towards realizing God is the biggest monster of them all.

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[31] Beal, 41.
[32] God also fights monsters and is a monster in the New Testament in the book of Revelation.
[33] Beal, 54.
[34] Beal, 55.

The events of the Holocaust also make one question God's monstrous nature. For Jews and Christians, God is not only all good but all powerful. This leads to many questions. Did God cause the Holocaust or stand by and let it occur? The idea of God being a bystander brings up the question of if silence is monstrous. Does God being silent and doing nothing about the Holocaust make God a monster? Or is God more monstrous if God directly caused or participated in the events of the Holocaust?

**Post Holocaust Theodicy and Reactions to Shoah**

The Holocaust created a rift in theological and moral thinking within both the scholarly community and on an individual level. How can one conceive of an event such as the Holocaust within one's religious traditions? How does understanding of God and morality change because of the Holocaust? Three prominent scholars- Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, and Elie Wiesel- all have very different views on how to explain and come to terms with the events of the Holocaust.[35]

Richard Rubenstein is an American born Jewish scholar who also has a PhD. in psychology. Rubenstein describes three major consequences for Jewish theology. First, he believes that after the Holocaust Jews can no longer speak of being "the chosen ones," and that Jews are individual humans. Second, that Nazism reveals that humans are no longer progressing; the demonic is part of human nature. Finally, God is "omnipotent nothingness."[36] This final idea

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[35] On Jewish responses to the Holocaust see Richard Rubenstein, "Job and Auschwitz," 233-252; Steven Kepnes, "Job and Post-Holocaust Theodicy," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust*, ed, Tom Linafelt (New York, NY, New York University Press, 2000), 252-267; Bob Reiss, "Jewish Thought about God after the Holocaust," *Theology: vol. 109, No. 850*: 262-272; John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, eds, *Holocaust Religious and Philosophical Implications* (St. Paul, MN, Paragon House, 1989), 259-264.
[36] Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, second edition (Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 305.

means that the traditional Jewish God is dead and needs to be replaced with something that fits into a post-Shoah world. Rubenstein also believes that "the traditional covenant theology must either be rejected or the Jew must accept the burden of guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust. He refuses to bear that burden and so rejects the God of the covenant."[37] Even though Rubenstein rejects the idea of a traditional God he believes that Judaism gives meaning to life and that Judaism is based on ritual and community rather than a belief in God. For Rubenstein the Holocaust leads to the death of God and loss of faith.[38] His outlook creates a theodicy in which humanity is responsible for all evil and suffering in the world because there is no God.

Emil Fackenheim has a different response to the horrors of the Holocaust. Fackenheim is a German born Jew who was sent to a concentration camp at 22; he then went to Canada where he studied and became a prominent Jewish philosopher.[39] Fackenheim believes that the Holocaust created a rift in history, and, because of this, all systems of thought need to be rethought.[40] Fackenheim's system of focuses on two aspects of God: the God of Exodus and the God of Sinai.[41] The God of Exodus intervened in history in order to save the Hebrew people from enslavement. The God of Saini gave the Jewish laws, the 613 commandments. For Fackenheim, the liberating God was not present at Auschwitz; but the commanding God was. Fackenheim asserts that, "I will boldly term a 614th commandment: *the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory*."[42] In other words Jews must carry on

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[37] S. Daniel Brelauer, "Theodicy and Ethics: Post-Holocaust Reflections," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy,* vol. 8 No. 3: 140.
[38] Brelauer, 140.
[39] John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Holocaust Religious and Philosophical Implications* (St. Paul, MN, Paragon House, 1989), 289.
[40] Roth and Berenbaum, 289.
[41] Emil Fackenheim, "The 614th Commandment," in *Holocaust Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Berenbaum (St. Paul, MN, Paragon House, 1989), 290.
[42] Fackenheim, 294.

their beliefs and traditions to keep the religion and culture alive. If Judaism is allowed to die out, then Hitler wins his ultimate victory.[43] Fackenheim's response to the Holocaust is rooted in traditional Jewish theology but he also changes this theology with the idea of the 614th commandment. Rather than give up on his faith he tries to find ways to justify God's actions (or lack thereof) during the events of the Holocaust.[44]

Elie Wiesel's response to the Holocaust is different than both Rubenstein and Fackenheim. Elie Wiesel was born in the small town of Signet, Transylvania in 1928.[45] As a young Jewish child he began studying the Torah and other Jewish texts. He worked very hard to learn anything he possibly could about Judaism and how to be a good person. He was extremely pious and unquestionably believed in God.[46] After the Nazis invaded Signet in 1943, a Jewish ghetto was created in the town.[47] Wiesel and his family were then sent to Auschwitz. Upon arrival he was separated from his mother and little sister and he never saw them again. He and his father stayed together during their camp experience.[48] When the Russian army was moving in on Auschwitz, Wiesel and his father were moved to Buchenwald.[49] His father died in Buchenwald before liberation of the camp.[50] After liberation Wiesel was sent to France as a part of OSE, "the children's rescue society."[51] During his time with OSE he continued his studies in the Torah and Talmud, and he also learned French, among other school subjects.[52] While still in

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[43] Fackenheim, 294.
[44] Fackenheim, 290.
[45] For an overview of Wiesel and his work see Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame, IN, Notre Dame University Press, 1983); Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen, eds, *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2013).
[46] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 1-30.
[47] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 54-56.
[48] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 88.
[49] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 91.
[50] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 92.
[51] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 110.
[52] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 111-115.

France Wiesel was hired by a newspaper and began his career as a journalist.[53] He eventually married and moved to the United States, where he continued to write and speak. He also worked as a professor and on the committee of the President for the USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). In 1986 he received a Nobel Peace Prize.[54]

Wiesel's response to the Holocaust focuses on questions rather than absolute truths. Wiesel never stops believing in God, he just realizes that the God he believes in might be a madman.[55] Wiesel was brought up in both the Hasidic and non-Hasidic traditions, in which he studied fervently. He profoundly believed in God before Auschwitz however, after arrival at the camps this belief changed.[56] His post-Holocaust theodicy was created as a response to the horrors that he experienced in Auschwitz and how they fit into a Jewish world view; he writes "Auschwitz is conceivable neither with God nor without Him. Perhaps I may someday come to understand man's role in the mystery Auschwitz represents, but never God's."[57] In his memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Wiesel states:

> I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it."[58] Wiesel's faith is that of rebellion and question, he states: "I will never cease to rebel against those who committed or permitted Auschwitz, including God. The questions I once asked myself about God's silence remain open. If they have an answer, I do not know it. More than that, I refuse to know it. But I maintain that the death of six million human beings poses a question to which no answer will ever be forthcoming.[59]

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[53] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 158.
[54] Roth and Berenbaum, 265.
[55] Richard Rubinstein, "Job and Auschwitz," 235.
[56] On Wiesel's religion see Katz and Rosen
[57] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 84.
[58] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 84.
[59] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 85.

Wiesel's ideas about God and his silence appears throughout all his work, most notably "Job Our Contemporary" and *The Trial of God*. Like Job, before going into the camps Wiesel could be considered to be an *ish tam* or perfect man (Job 1:1-3).[60] Everything he did was to better himself for God or to praise God. Then for both Job and Wiesel tragedy struck. In Job's case it was at the hand of God over a contest. For Wiesel a much darker force was at work, that of the Nazis. For both, hardships started out as events that were not faith breaking. Even after the death of his children, crops, and servants, Job still praised God (Job 1:13-22). At first only the foreign Jews were removed from Signet, then Jews had to wear a yellow star, and then they were all moved into a small section of town. But during all of this Wiesel continued to study the Torah and Talmud.[61] However, both Job's and Wiesel's lives took a turn for the worse, which made both of them question their faith. For Job his body was afflicted with boils and sores. He was literally rotting alive sitting on a heap (Job 2:1-9). His friends told him that he caused his own misfortune (Job 4-26). There is much back and forth discussion between Job and his friends during the next few chapters. Once again Job got fed up and called out to God demanding that God come and explain God actions (Job 27). For Wiesel his questioning of faith occurs his first night at Auschwitz, which he recounts in *Night*: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camps, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed…never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams into ashes."[62] Even though Wiesel questions his faith he continues to study the Torah and Talmud in the camps with the help of another prisoner.[63]

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[60] On the ish-tam (especially vis-à-vis) see Crenshaw, 40.
[61] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 40-60.
[62] Wiesel, *Night*, (New York, NY, Hill and Wang, 2006), 34.
[63] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 79-82.

In the Book of Job, God created a whirlwind and spoke to Job. God began berating Job with questions, which overwhelmed Job, and Job actually stopped speaking. In the end Job recanted and forgave God, and his life is restored to better than what it was before the suffering (Job 42). Wiesel takes a very different approach- he never stopped questioning God. Wiesel never completely stops believing but he does not believe in God in the same way that he had before Auschwitz.[64] A solution to the problem of evil, to theodicy, would be a final word on God's engagement with human who suffer. Yet, Wiesel realizes that there can be no more final solutions after the Holocaust, only questions; and God especially needs to be constantly questioned.[65]

Wiesel does not seek answers, he seeks questions. He writes, "because I don't think there is an answer. Maybe God can give an answer, and even if God gave me the answer, I wouldn't accept it. If God performed a miracle by saving some, that means he refused to perform miracles in condemning others. I don't go for that."[66] During and after the Holocaust some of the victims were trying to understand why God had allowed all of the horrors of the camps to occur, and why they had fallen victim to them. Some believed that the Jews were being punished for some sort of sin that they had committed, based on traditional theodicies. Others, like Elie Wiesel, believed that they Jews were innocent and that like Job, God was a perpetrator and allowed these things to happen. Wiesel states, "the world is suffering now. It's being punished. But I don't think it deserves it, by the way, because the children of today don't deserve that punishment. They are not guilty. Surely not. Only those who committed the crimes are guilty. Only the killers

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[64] Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 84.
[65] Roth and Berenbaum, 265-267. This work is a collection of essays of various peoples' responses to the Holocaust.
[66] Richard D. Heffner, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*, ed. Thomas J. Vinciguerra (New York, NY, Schocken Books, 2001), 152-153.

are killers. And yet we suffer."[67] Wiesel believes that one can only question because answers are final solutions and there can be no more final solutions in this world. He wants people to think and try to comprehend the events of the Holocasut but never to give a finalized answer.[68] Wiesel uses scriptures and storytelling "to go into the audience to pose the questions that are on, or should be on, everyone's mind."[69]

Through his experiences in the camps, Wiesel became a changed man. He no longer undoubtedly believed in God; rather, he questioned his God, and was angry at him for the crimes God committed against the Jewish people.[70] Through reading Wiesel's works, one can see a comparison between Job and Wiesel. Both suffered greatly through events that they did nothing to cause. However, after Job questions God, he repents and continues believing. Wiesel's reaction is a differently; he begins to question not just God, but also existence of justice and humanity in the world around him, and he never stops this questioning.[71] Wiesel forms a complex approach to understanding theology "rooted in a sense of the text that has shaped modern Jewish *academic* study of the Bible as much as the literature of the faith."[72] This complex theology appears in Wiesel's writings.

**"Job Our Contemporary"**

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[67] Heffner, 146.
[68] Heffner, 155-156.
[69] Everett Fox, "Wiesel as Interpreter of Biblical Narrative," in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2013), 22.
[70] Reuven Kimelman, "Wiesel and the Stories of the Rabbis," in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2013), 44.
[71] John K. Roth, "Wiesel's Contribution to a Christian Understanding of Judaism," in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2013), 269-270.
[72] Joel Rosenberg, "Alone with God," in *Elie Wiesel: Jewish, Literary, and Moral Perspectives*, eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2013), 10.

In 1976 Wiesel wrote *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*; in which he rewrites Torah and Talmud stories because "when the archetype of the past is understood to be inadequate for the current situation, the old tradition can be reread and reworked in light of the experience, giving way to new meaning and new significance."[73] In it he retells the stories of Adam, Cain and Able, Issac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and finally, Job.

His essay on Job is called, "Job, Our Contemporary." He retells the story of Job, similarly to how the Bible tells it. In the opening of the essay Wiesel situates the story of Job both in the past in the present; "whenever we attempt to tell our own story, we transmit his. The opposite is true also."[74] Wiesel's version of Job flows better than the Biblical version. It is much easier to read and comprehend. Wiesel also adds in the suspected ideas about who Job was and what he did.[75] Wiesel also equates Job with the survivors of the Holocaust, which affects his reading of Job and the outcome of the story.[76] Wiesel's story recounts what the Bible asserts, "the book's prologue describes his dramatic downfall."[77] This version follows the same pattern as the Bible story except that Wiesel interjects his own ideas based on Midrash and other scholarly works.[78] Wiesel's analysis and explanation of the book continues on for quite a bit until he reaches the final chapters of Job which is where he diverts from the original tale.

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[73] Frederick L. Downing. *Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography* (Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, 2008), 196.
[74] Elie Wiesel, "Job Our Contemporary," Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York, NY, Radom House, 1976), 211-212.
[75] Wiesel, "Job Our Contemporary," 213.
[76] Wiesel, "Job Our Contemporary," 233-234.
[77] Wiesel, "Job Our Contemporary," 216.
[78] Wiesel, "Job Our Contemporary," 217.

The ending is the main source of issue that Wiesel find in the text. In the end he comes to a much different conclusion. Wiesel writes:

> And it is at this point at which I register my protest. Much as I admired Job's passionate rebellion, I am deeply troubled by his hasty abdication…I prefer to think the Book's true ending was lost. That Job died without having repented, without having humiliated himself; that he succumbed to his grief an uncompromising and whole man…Job's resignation as man was an insult to man. He should not have given up so easily. He should have continued to protest, to refuse the handouts.[79]

It is here that Wiesel begins to create a modern day rewrite of Job, one which will be complete in *The Trial of God*. Here he calls into question Job's response and is not satisfied with it. Not only is he not satisfied, he asserts that he would have done it differently; Wiesel will return to the book of Job in later writings.

***The Trial of God***

In "Job Our Contemporary," Wiesel expresses disappointment in Job's response to God and address how he should have responded; this response becomes *The Trial of God*. *The Trial of God* is based on an actual *din torah* that Wiesel witnessed at Auschwitz:

> The teacher took Wiesel back to his own barracks, and there, with the young boy as the only witness, three great Jewish scholar-masters of Talmud, Halakhah, and Jewish jurisprudence- put God on trial, creating, in that eerie place "a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty." The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the LORD God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found *guilty* of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an "infinity of silence", the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said "it's time for evening prayers."[80]

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[79] Frederick Downing, 233-234.
[80] Robert McAfee Brown, "Introduction", *The Trial of God*, vii.

This trial stuck with Wiesel all throughout his life. He set his play as a "*Purimschpiel* (a play to be enacted on the feat of Purim), although one written in the style of a 'tragic farce'."[81] More than that he takes the play out of the context of the Holocaust completely.

The play was published in 1979 and it is based on the trial at Auschwitz that Wiesel witnessed. It is a reinterpretation of the Book of Job. In this play Wiesel expresses how Job should have reacted.[82] This play is the culmination of the ideas of Wiesel's theodicy. The main character of the play is named Berish, and he is the Job figure. In the play it is Purim, three minstrels come to Berish's inn and eat and drink even though they have no money.[83] The minstrels offer to put on a play to pay for their meal; however, Berish decides he wants it to be a *din Torah*, a trial of God. Berish is putting God on trial for the pogrom that killed his family and all the Jews in the town, just as Job called God to answer for all the awful events that happened in his life.[84]

The language that Berish uses when he speaks of his own suffering and God echoes the language that Job uses. For example Berish says, "God sought me out and God struck me down."[85] In Job 6:4, Job says "for the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me." For both Berish and Job, God is the cause of their unwarranted suffering. Later in *The Trial of God*, Berish says "I have done only good, not He. He has done me nothing but harm."[86] Job says, "though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me. Though I am blameless, he would prove me

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[81] McAfee Brown, vii.
[82] On interpretations of *The Trial of God* and other related criticism see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust", *Religious Studies*, vol. 26, No 2 (1990), 277-293.
[83] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 3-56.
[84] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 57-110.
[85] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 26.
[86] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 89.

perverse" (Job 9:20). Berish and Job are both innocent, and they are aware of their innocence, but God still inflicts suffering upon them. Berish and Job also both want to question God for the injustice he has caused. Berish says "good, let's stage a trial! Against whom? Imbeciles, haven't you understood yet? Against the Master of the universe! Against the Supreme Judge."[87] Job calls for a trial in order to ask God why he is suffering. He states, "but I would like to speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God" (Job 13:3). In *The Trial of God* Wiesel's character of Berish is a reinterpreted Job who is mad as hell and wants God to be judged in the harshest of ways.

In Wiesel's rewrite of Job the three friends that come to Job are the three minstrels- Mendel, Avremel, and Yankel- that arrive at Berish's inn on Purim eve. Both the minstrels and Job's friends question the protagonist and discuss how great God is. One of the minstrels, named Mendel, explains to Berish his belief in God; he says, "what if I told you that I fear *for* God? You seem to confuse fear and awe. I am in awe of God, but I do not fear Him."[88] The minstrels also function to question Berish and to draw out his accusations against God. As Mendel questions, "so- you don't understand. Neither do I. Is that enough reason to reject him? Suppose you understood would you accept?"[89] Job's friends question Job about his sins because they believe that God would not punish an innocent person. As Eliphaz remarks, "think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off" (Job 4:7). Job's friends believe that they understand how God functions. Bildad adds, "see, God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of the evildoers" (Job 8:20). The minstrels and Job's friends in both stories act less like supportive

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[87] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 55.
[88] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 53.
[89] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 43.

people and instead question and assert their own beliefs onto the protagonists. They both espouse traditional theodicies, justifying God and equating sin with punishment.

Once they decide to put God on trial, the rest of the roles are determined except for God's attorney. No one is willing to be God's attorney until Sam, a mysterious stranger shows up.[90] When this character first appears his role is unclear. In the characters list Wiesel describes Sam as "the STRANGER. Intelligent, cynical, extremely courteous. Diabolical. His age? Still young. Neat, almost elegant. Self-controlled."[91] Sam appears at the end of act one but does not speak until the very end of act two, when he says that he will defend God. Sam is clearly unusual; he tells Berish and the others: "My name would mean nothing to you. Call me Sam."[92] Right away it is clear to the reader that something is not right with Sam. He tells the group that "I travel a lot. I meet many people. That's my favorite pastime: to meet people. I like the variety. I like to please. To gamble. To win."[93] Sam is the *ha-satan* figure from the book of Job. Later in the play Sam describes himself in almost the exact way that *ha-satan* is described in the book of Job. Sam says "I'm His servant. He created the world and me without asking for my opinion; He may do with both whatever He wishes. Our task is to glorify Him, to praise Him, to love Him… what if I told you that I am God's emissary? I visit His creation and bring back stories to Him. I see all things, I watch all men. I cannot do all I want, but I can undo all things.[94]

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In the Book of Job, *ha-satan* is described as one of the "heavenly beings" (Job 1:6). The book continues "the LORD said to Satan 'where have you come from?' Satan answered the LORD 'from going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it" (Job 1:7). Then God

[90] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 111-160.
[91] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 1.
[92] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 113.
[93] Wiesel. *The Trial of God*, 115.
[94] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 157-158.

and Satan make a bet on Job's ability to remain faithful in adversity and God gives Satan permission to inflict suffering upon Job (Job 1:8-12). Wiesel's character of Sam has added layers of characterization which are influenced by the evolving ideas of Satan that come out of the intertestamental period.[95] Over the course of the third act it becomes clear that Sam is more than just the accuser, he is the metaphysical embodiment of evil, and it is his fault that the pogroms occur. However, even this Satan is connected to God, as he seems to be doing God's work. The evolution from adversary to full blown embodiment of evil appears in the character of Sam in *The Trial of God*. Does the idea of a metaphysical Satan who is diametrically opposed to God change how one should view the Book of Job, *Trial of God*, or Auschwitz? If the character of *ha-satan* is a metaphysical being opposed to God then is Job's suffering used to punish God or just to hurt the human race? In Wiesel's *Trial of God* the character of Sam is revealed to be Satan/*ha-satan* and this character is the only one who will defend God; "evil here is no mere *privation boni* in this play. It plays an active role-as the defender of God- indeed God's *only* defender."[96] What makes this character so interesting in *Trial of God* is that it is unclear what Satan tradition the character is coming from and also because Sam has a connection to God.

The men in the group accept Sam's answers and allow him to be God's attorney. Maria is the only one who can see through Sam's guise. She says, "Don't! Don't trust him! Not him! He's mean, evil! Don't let him close! He's Satan himself! I swear on the life of the Lord! And on my own! He is Satan."[97] Maria gave up her virginity to Sam and knows his true identity. Over the

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[95] The idea of Satan evolved over the intertestamental period which is explained in great depth in T. J. Wray and Gregory Mobley, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots*, (New, NY, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 50-73.
[96] Matthew Fox, "Afterward: The Trial of God, The Trial of Us", *The Trial of God*, 171-172.
[97] Wiesel. *The Trial of God*, 115.

course of the rest of the act it becomes clear that Sam is in fact the metaphysical being of evil, but one who works for God.

Even though Sam is a metaphysical being he is working for God. Sam is the only one willing to defend God and his actions. If Sam works for God like *ha-satan* works in the book of Job, then it would make sense as to why Sam would defend God. It seems that Elie Wiesel is combining the character of *ha-satan* from the book of Job and the other embodiments of Satan in order to make a commentary on God's silence and the ambiguity of God's guilt. God once again becomes a bystander in this situation, giving instructions for destruction but allowing Satan or Sam to carry them out and take the blame.

After Sam's arrival the trial gets underway. Berish's opening statement is a more extreme version of the accusations made in Job:

> Accuse Him of hostility, cruelty, and indifference. Either He dislikes His chosen people or He doesn't care about them-period! But then, why has He chosen us-why not someone else, for a change? Either He knows what's happening to us, or He doesn't wish to know! In both cases He is…He is…guilty! Yes, guilty![98]

Berish makes other arguments that mirror Job's lament his story, "I had everything, and everything was taken away from me."[99] However, as the argument between Sam and Berish heats up and Berish makes claims that are clearly reflection of Wiesel's beliefs in questioning God and blaming God:

> If He insists upon going on with His methods, let him- but I won't say Amen. Let Him crush me, I won't say Kaddish. Let Him kill me, let Him kill us all, I shall shout and shout that it's His fault. I'll use my last energy to make a protest known. Whether I live or die, I submit to Him no longer.[100]

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[98] Wiesel, *The Trial of God* 125.
[99] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 126.
[100] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 133.

Sam and Berish argue while the three minstrels act as judges. Before either can rest their case, they are interrupted by the priest who is trying to alert that them the pogrom is coming quickly. The priest is trying to get them to leave the inn and get to safety but the party will not leave; they continue the trial.

The ending of the play does not correspond with the biblical book of Job. The end of Job is happy; Job repents, God gives him everything back, and they both go on with their lives like nothing happened. Wiesel did not believe this is the way that Job should have ended. The Book of Job ends with Job being silent because he "surrendered unconditionally."[101] The ending to *The Trial of God* is much darker. At this point the priest has made it clear that the pogrom is coming; the party can hear the angry mob in the distance. Everyone thinks that Sam can save them, until Sam says his last line:

> So- you took me for a saint, a Just? Me? How could you be that blind? How could you be that stupid? If you only knew, if you only knew…(*Satan is laughing. He lifts his arm as if to give a signal. At that precise moment the last candle goes out, and the door opens, accompanied by deafening and murderous roars*).[102]

Here it is revealed that Sam is really Satan and that he is responsible for the pogroms. The trial that was being held will go unanswered because the entire party is massacred by the mob. The trail will also go unanswered because God has been rendered silent by Berish's relentless questioning. This is a reversal of the silence in the Book of Job 38-42. In Job, God's questions render Job speechless. In *The Trial of God*, God never appears. This lack of appearance exemplifies God's silence. The idea about unanswered questions is central to the idea that Wiesel creates a modern day Job. He creates a new ending, one in which questions remain unanswered

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[101] Wiesel, "Job, Our Contemporary," 232.
[102] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 161.

and one that is not a happily ever after. Wiesel believes that if one is questioning God that there can be no responses, which is why he leaves the play's din Torah open ended.[103]

Second, after the events of the Holocaust it is easy to understand why Wiesel does not believe in happy endings. The pattern of God silencing man is reversed in Wiesel's "Job Our Contemporary" and *Trial of God*; in both of these works it is God who is silenced by humans. In Wiesel's post-Shoah Job it is the human who silences God and who will not let God answer. In *Trial of God*, God gets violent because God knows God has now answer to give. One could argue that God allows Sam to cause the deadly pogrom because he is angry about being rendered silence and violence is his only response. This inversion of silence within the text is one way Wiesel rewrites Job.

Wiesel's theodicy is clearly expressed in four different ways over the course of this play. First, Wiesel is expressing the idea of an absent and silent God, who needs to be put on trial for the injustices he has caused.[104] Second, the God of this world is a violent God because "he annihilated Shamgorod" and "Drohobitz, [and] Zhironov."[105] Third, the idea of justice. It is humans' responsibility or God's. As Berish says, "Listen: either He is responsible or He is not. If He is, let's judge Him, if He is not, let Him stop judging us."[106] Finally, the idea of Satan as a negative being who is still carrying out God's work. As Sam explains, "I am not allowed to reveal myself to you. And what if I told you that I am God's emissary? I visit His creation and bring stories back to him. I see all things, I watch all men. I cannot do all I want, but I can undo all things."[107] These four different ideas come

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[103] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 160-161.
[104] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 123, 125, 127.
[105] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 133, 151.
[106] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 54.
[107] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 158.

together to form Wiesel's larger theodicy which is expressed in *The Trial of God*, his post-Shoah version of Job.

**Conclusion**

Elie Wiesel has reinterpreted the story of Job to fit into a post-Holocaust world. His questioning theodicy is very similar to that of Job however, as expressed in "Job, Our Contemporary" and *The Trial of God*. Wiesel has other ideas about how to respond to God in the face of suffering. Wiesel believes that God needs constantly to be questioned lest God will remain silent and absent.[108] Wiesel also believes in earthly justice; it is a human's right (if not human's duty) to question God about the horrific events he has caused, because God is complex.[109] Finally, Wiesel presents interesting ideas on *ha-satan*/Satan. He expresses the idea of the accuser a little differently; instead of *ha-satan* just doing God's will, Satan not only performs negative actions, but he is also willing to defend God's reasoning for them. Job represents ideas of suffering and questioning from the Old Testament; after the events of the Holocaust these ideas needed to be reworked and rewritten, and the new persona for these ideas are the characters of Elie Wiesel.

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Theodicies like Wiesel become of heightened importance after the Holocaust. First, because these theodicies hold God accountable for the horrors that took place during the Holocaust without dismissing the human element. Second, they allow for humans to express their issues with God and to still continue their beliefs. Elie Wiesel never stopped believing in God but he never stopped questioning him either. Finally, these theodicies are

[108] Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, 127.
[109] Cohn-Sherbok, 277.

created out of a belief that both God and humans have to act less monstrously in order to avoid tragedy.

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